

Alia Atkinson: Jamaica's Tour de Force

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How does a Jamaican girl go from learning to swim at age 4 to making an Olympic team at 15 to becoming Texas A&M's second NCAA swim champion, just moments after her teammate became the first?

How, two years later, does she arrive at her third Olympic Games without a swimsuit, win a tiebreaker to clinch the last spot in the 100m breaststroke final, then place fourth to match Jamaica's best Olympic swimming result in history?

How does she go on to claim nine World Championship medals (seven of them in a 25m pool) and set two short-course World Records in breaststroke - only to break her own 50m mark again in October, two months shy of her 30th birthday?

And how does she cope with being a rare black swimmer on tour? And endure heavy expectations that in Tokyo 2020, she could become the first Jamaican swimmer to win an Olympic medal?



We have so many questions for - and answers from - Alia Atkinson.

Let's start at the beginning.

I'm from Roehampton, about 30-40 minutes from the beach. We moved to Florida when I was 12 or 13. My older sister, Sannica, is a medical doctor. My older brother, Adi, was a very good breaststroker. He's the one I wanted to beat most of all. He stopped at 18 to pursue aviation, but he was always the one I looked up to, tried to emulate, tried to reach, tried to - become, I guess.

Did you ever beat him?

No

In 2009, Adi died in a plane crash. You wear a necklace in his honour. What does it look like?

It's sterling silver. It looks like a teardrop but pointed at the bottom. It's something I bought later. I was looking at it and thought the name "Flight of the Phoenix" was cool.

Are you related to Janelle Atkinson, the only other Jamaican swimmer to place fourth in the Olympics (in Sydney, in 400m free)?

No, we're not related.

How did you pick breaststroke?

I actually was a 'flyer and a freestyler but when I was 13, the breaststroke just clicked and I was like, 'Oh, I understand this stroke now.' And that was it. The most challenging part is that if one thing is off, it throws everything off. If your kick is off, then your head position is off, your arms are going too much, and now you look like a chicken popping up in the water. I can fake a freestyle and a 'fly; just attack the water and keep the tempo. But when you fake the breaststroke, you're actually doing more strokes and you're not getting anywhere. You have to be patient with it. You have to have the flow.

In 2004, you made your first Olympic team at age 15.

I was still a junior in high school. I swam for the club team around the corner from my house. My club coach, Christopher Anderson, was very excited because it was his first big competition as well. He tried switching practices to Athens time, so we would try to swim at like 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. to emulate the time of prelims. It was hectic!

How did you qualify for those Athens Games? Was there a Jamaican Olympic trial?

No, Jamaica doesn't have that many swimmers so it was by FINA time standards. I think Janelle Atkinson got the "A" cut, and three of us made the "B" cut. After all the "A" cuts were [slotted] from all the countries, the fastest ones with the "B" cut were picked up.

After your Olympic debut, how did you decide to swim for Texas A&M University?

Not a lot of colleges approached me but coach Steve Bultman decided to try me out. When I joined, in 2006, the school never had an NCAA champion but in 2008 four girls made the Olympics: Christine Marshall from the US, who got bronze in the 4x200 free relay; Julia Wilkinson from Canada, who became Texas A&M's first NCAA swim champion in 2010 [note: Atkinson clinched the Aggies' second NCAA swim title, one event later]; Triin Aljand from Estonia, and me.

At the 2012 Olympics, you tied Canada's Tera Van Beilen for fourth place in the semifinal of the 100m breaststroke, and beat her easily in a race-off to make the final. How did you feel about the tie? And how did you feel about the swim-off?

The tie questioned my motivation, like: Do you really want it? I could either accept that I was never fast enough to make it to the finals, or I can change it around and earn my spot in the finals. Funny enough, Julia Wilkinson was there in 2012 as well, for team Canada, and they were like, 'Go Tera!' and she's like, 'Ummm, I've seen Alia race in college, and she can come back pretty easily.' So that was fun.

You got Lane 8 in the final. Could you see anything?

I saw Lane 7 and maybe a little bit of Lane 6, but that was it. I had no idea. I just knew I was ahead of Lane 7, so I was thinking, 'Just get better than eighth!' Coming into the wall: I see fourth and was like, 'What just happened? Could I have done something better?' But also: Let's see what I can do now! I planned to retire after 2012 if I didn't make the top-three at the Olympics, but I figured fourth was kind of like God telling me, 'C'mon, keep going!' I was very motivated. Actually, 2013 was my best training year, but because of all the attention on me and all the expectations, Worlds in Barcelona wasn't very good. Missing the finals in both [50 and 100 breast] really prompted me to do the World Cups right afterwards.

Did you make all the arrangements yourself? You're often a one-woman team.

In 2013, my mother, Sharon, took on the role of manager: figuring out all the paperwork, flights, finding meets, the entries, payments, all that. But finances really gave me a blow because I didn't know where that would come from. In 2012, got a little bit from the International Swimming Hall of Fame, about \$1,000. The grant was fantastic but I still had lots of responsibilities with suits. Companies were always promising, promising, but nothing came through. I actually went to the 2012 Olympics without a suit. I was on the premise that I was going to get it, and it didn't come before I left. I thought, 'Okay, it's going to come before my coach leaves.' It didn't. My mom was the last one to go - and it didn't come, still. So everybody pulled together their Olympic per diem and my mother ran around the streets of London trying to find a Speedo shop - or any shop. Luckily, across the street from the village was a mall so we bought a suit the day before the meet. It was a black Speedo.

Without financing, how did you get to the World Cups?

I had saved enough money from the US Grand Prix meets to go to the first 2013 World Cup in Eindhoven. I did fantastic [won two events] and made enough to pay for the next cluster. I was just going there to get out of debt and pay for my next travel ticket. That's all I was going for - not the prize, not the overall - just to see how much money I could collect. Thankfully, I did well enough the first three years to be able to pay my way.

Now you're a four-time Olympian with two World Records and nine World Championship medals. Has your success changed swimming in Jamaica? More pools? A solid development program?

Development program, no. Unfortunately, it has been a lot of: Let's do this, let's do that, but no action behind it. But media-wise, it has been a lot better, which is fantastic because it's getting it in everybody's head that: Hey! Jamaica can be better in swimming if we get our kids in it. But what's most important is educating the public and learning swimming as a life skill. If they love it, they will continue, but at least they will know how to swim.

Aside from college, you've worked with the same coach since age 14, Christopher Anderson. Who is he? Does he have other Olympians?

He's a breaststroker, from Boston, swam at Clemson. We train in a very low key 50-meter pool behind a high school in Pembroke Pines, Florida, [30 minutes north of Miami]. In '04, Janelle Atkinson's younger brother, Jevon, and I made the Olympic team. In, '08, he had Jevon, me, and Natasha Moodie, [the entire 2008 Jamaican Olympic swim team].

How else has he helped you?

When I was growing up, Chris knew the obstacles I would have, being black, being from Jamaica, being not very sociable, so he prepped me for everything that would come later in life. Travelling the world on my own, I would get looks like, 'What are you doing here?' When I became fast and I actually beat the other swimmers, it was more like, 'This isn't your realm.' Then it became, 'Your body isn't beneficial for swimming. Shouldn't you be in track and field or basketball?' And in Russia, a couple times, we had problems with the bus because the driver wouldn't open the door for me. I showed my ID. 'I'm a swimmer!' But no. I had to wait for other swimmers to come. Or coaches wouldn't let me in their lanes. That's why I try and be open to the other people of colour, like Pacific Islanders and Africans, because as soon as somebody looks at you, all they see is black. They don't see: Oh, she's from Jamaica, or she's from US, or she's from so-and-so. Like I'm sure Simone Manuel gets all sort of stuff, but as soon as you see USA, you think, 'Okay, she earned her spot; she earned her right to be here.' For everybody else, they're just like, 'Oh, she got in on universality, or

she doesn't really need to be here, or we don't need to look at her.' So growing up, my coach prepped me for that. He made me tough. I'm very grateful for that.

How did he make you tough?

He would always say things jokingly but with a hint of truth. I'd be like, 'Oh, she's doing so well!' He's like, 'Because she gets finances, all these doctors, her country gives her suits.' Obvious stuff, but if I didn't hear it from him, from a loving place, I might have been affected mentally.

What other stereotypes do you deal with?

They say people of colour don't usually swim outside the freestyle events and anything over 100 because of their muscular structure. Considering I swam 50, 100, and 200 breaststroke, everybody would be like, 'Well, she can't do a 200.' Coach would be [sarcastic] like; 'Well, look at her legs! Of course she can!' jokingly. Behind them, he would turn to me and be like, 'You need to kick their butts!' And I'm like, 'Yes sir! I'm on it!' I think that's why he trained me so much in the 200, too, to show that we can be more than just sprinters.

Lastly, you earned a big honour in October: Jamaica's "Order of Distinction, Rank of Commander." Does it come with a title like Dame or Madame?

Ha ha! That would be cool! I have a medal given by the Governor General who is appointed by Queen Elizabeth II. People are nominated for their contribution to Jamaica. It's the fifth-highest honour. I think for the higher ones you might get diplomatic status but I'm not there yet.

