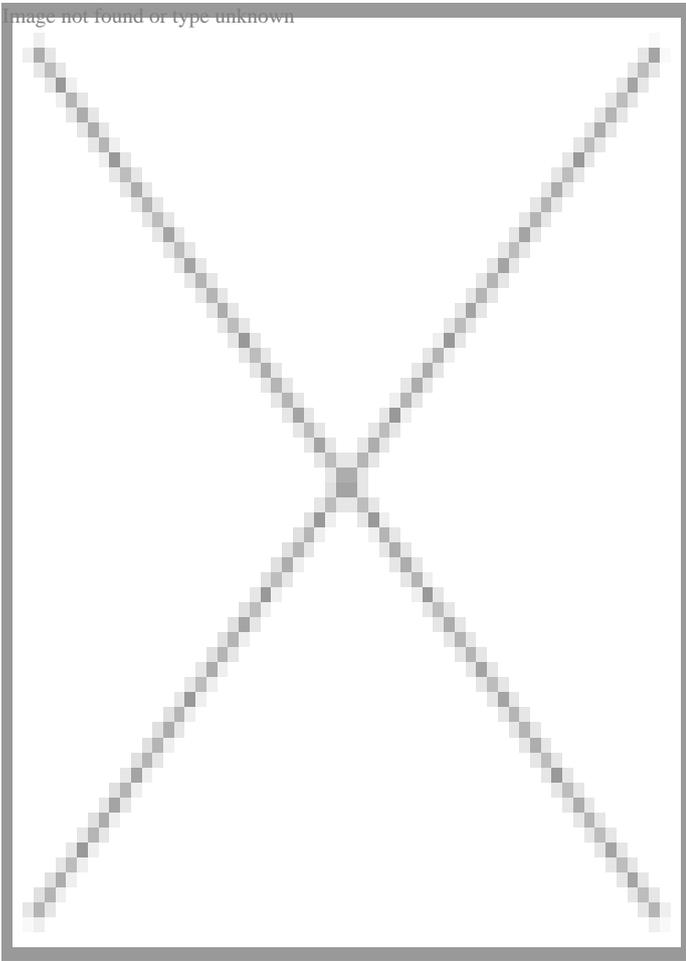


Atkinson (JAM): The smiling storyteller

Pedro Adrega, FINA Communications Department

“Always compete with a smile”. A powerful motto and the trademark of Alia Atkinson, the breaststroke ace from Jamaica. It was also one of the most iconic scenes at the 2014 FINA World Swimming Championships (25m), in Doha (QAT), when she got the gold medal in the 100m breaststroke, in a (equalled) World Record time. When looking at the scoreboard, Atkinson could not hide her astonishment and her famous smile immediately came after the initial surprise. Outside the water, this positive and humble attitude also follows her everywhere. And greatly contributes to one of her most cherished hobbies: to write stories for children.

“I am naturally a person like this. I normally smile, whether the situation is good or bad... It’s something I put up before my emotions. In a way, it’s how the world sees me before I can start expressing something”, confesses the Jamaican star. Cherishing her “childish mentality”, she went on developing a special skill: to write stories for children. “I always had a childish behaviour and as I get older, I see the importance of sticking to that attitude as it sometimes helps in our complicated lives. Writing those stories reminds me of that childish behaviour, and bringing this to children, it kind of tells them that sometimes they are growing quicker than they should, in a challenging environment”, explains Atkinson, who is “working on publishing those stories”.



After winning the gold in the 100m breast in Doha 2014 - Photo by gettyimages

With a long international career, 2015 represented Atkinson's most successful appearance at the FINA World Championships, when she earned silver in the 50m and bronze in the 100m breaststroke, in Kazan (RUS). In 25m-pool, she has 10 podium presences, including four titles: 50m/100m breaststroke in 2018, and 100m breaststroke in 2016 and 2014. After many presences (and successes) also in the FINA Swimming World Cup, Atkinson is taking part in the FINA Champions Swim Series for the first time. She is competing in the 50m and 100m breaststroke, her strongest events, in both Shenzhen and Beijing legs.

“Being the beginning of 2020, and given the field of athletes here, this competition is important to see where I am, and also to measure what can I succeed at the Olympics – what is in reach or not”, she admits.

At 31, the Jamaican great is trying to get her fifth selection for the Olympic Games in Tokyo. In 2004, in Athens (GRE), a teenager then, Atkinson started her Olympic adventure in a discreet way, with a 32nd position in the 100m breaststroke. She evolved since then and got very close to an historic medal in London 2012, when she finished fourth in her pet event. In Rio 2016, she was once more in the final, but touching the wall in the eighth position.

“In 2016, I thought I was in the ‘podium area’ – but I finished fourth in the semis and arrived eighth... So, even if you feel you are ‘there’, many things can still happen. It doesn't matter how I feel now, the important is to have a strong mentality and to think that I go there and I'll do my best. Going into Rio, I was physically and mentally in a better shape than now... and the result was what it was. So, not feeling so prepared now may be a good thing in the end!”,

Atkinson considers.

Being a 50m breaststroke specialist, the Jamaican star is naturally advocating the introduction of the shorter events in the Olympic programme (only the 50m free is contested at the Games): “I’d love that to happen! I know a lot of swimmers who would benefit from 50m events. They have included mixed relays instead, which in my case, coming from a country with not so many top-level swimmers, is a challenge. Having 50m events, would give more opportunities to developing countries. It would definitely bring additional exposure and entertainment to the sport!”

Living and training in Florida (USA), Alia Atkinson reflects on the reality of her native country. “Jamaica will never be a land of swimmers. It’s not that we don’t have swimmers, we do. In the Caribbean region, we have a lot of talented youngsters. The problem is that Swimming is not popular enough to be sustained in the region, as a high-level sport, needing international participation and adequate funds. Moreover, the pools aren’t around and people don’t make long distances just to swim: it’s not that popular”.

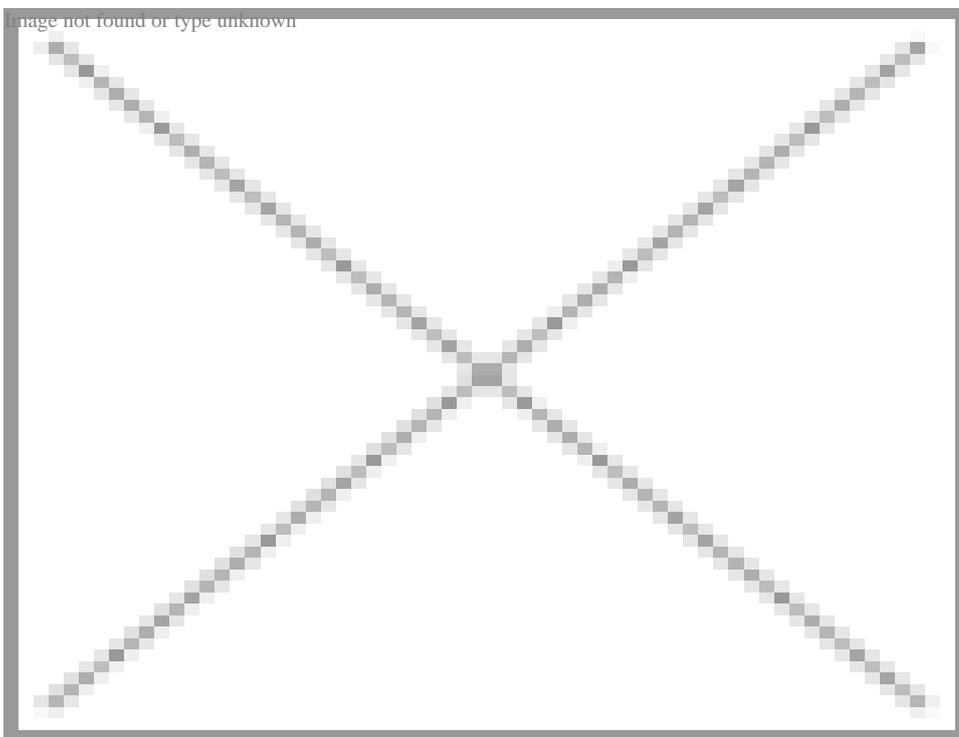


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In her case, in an age when many swimmers start to think about retirement, Atkinson remains determined. “I still train six/seven times a week, in a two-hour session basis. As I got older, I decided some things needed to change. I didn’t realise for a long time what it was, I know it now: it’s the recovery part”. And the motivation to continue? “There is always the feeling that I need to accomplish something else. After I get that, there is always more. So, if I am physically and mentally capable to do it, I’ll continue. I am also blessed with the support staff around me; all these people are stick to that same dream and goal”.

And the successful tale goes on for the storyteller. The one of her own life and career. The one of that eternal child, with that eternal smile.
