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## Haley Anderson (USA): “I’ve always been really tough”

Aimee Berg, FINA Aquatics World Magazine Correspondent (USA)

**A top-10 finish at the World Championships. That's all she needed to qualify for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Instead,**

**Haley Anderson chased – and captured – the silver medal in the women's open water 10km in Gwangju this summer.**

**And when she did, the California native qualified for her third consecutive Olympic Games in open water – just the**

**fourth woman in history to do so.**

Anderson has come a long way since 2012 when she made her first Olympic team as a 20-year-old college student at the University of Southern California. Eight days before her Olympic debut, Haley's older sister, Alyssa, won an Olympic gold medal in the pool by swimming in the heats of the US 4x200m free relay. At the time, Haley was at a pre-Olympic training camp in Canada and watched Alyssa's performance on TV. But when Haley jumped into the Serpentine in Hyde Park for the 10km in London, her family was in the stands. On the final lap of the two-hour race, Haley sped up and nearly caught the leader, but her move came too late and she lost to Eva Risztov of Hungary by four-tenths of a second, taking silver.

Motivated by that slim margin, Anderson competed at the 2016 Rio Olympics four years later, only to place fifth.

*"I'm not happy – and I was never happy – with that finish,"* Anderson said of her Rio result. *"I put a lot of pressure on*

*myself beforehand. I'm very rational and I know that no one else puts pressure on me. It's all coming from myself. But that*

*overwhelmed myself. I've always handled stress pretty well but I don't think I handled it well that year.*

Now, as Anderson approaches Tokyo, the 28-year-old continues to train at USC with the same coaches as she has for the past decade: Dave Salo and Catherine Kase.

In October, she spoke by phone with FINA Magazine to look back on her career and look ahead to her third Games.

**I try to push myself**

**What are you doing differently to train for Tokyo than you did for London and Rio?**

I've been in the same programme for 10 years, it's worked and I enjoy it, but you can't do the exact same things and expect different results. Both Dave and Catherine are really good at making things different so I'm not bored out of my mind in the pool – and you don't find that in many places. Also, being around the college scene, you always get freshmen that have spunk and energy at 6 a.m. Those people make it really enjoyable. They bring new energy to the group every year.

**Over three Olympic quads, has your mileage increased, decreased or stayed the same?**

I don't count my miles. I like to race. If there's someone next to me, I will race them. This year, we don't have another girl distance swimmer, so I'm with the boys like Victor Johansson [who set Swedish national records in 800m and 1500m at the 2017 FINA World Championships], Ous Mellouli [of Tunisia, the 2012 Olympic champion in 10km and twice an Olympic medallist in the 1500m freestyle] and some American college boys. Even though they're beating me, I try to keep up. I try to push myself. I think, 'How hard can I push myself today?' Some people think they need to be at 100% to have a good practice. I think you just need to give 100% of whatever you have. Am I feeling 80%? Well, how well can I push that 80%? Even if you're not at 100%, you need to give what you have.

**How much of your training do you do in the pool compared to open water?**

Ninety-nine per cent of my training is in the pool. It's easier to calculate how fast you're going and keep track of progress throughout the season. But if I have a race coming up in salt water, warm water or cold water, I'll try to acclimate as best as I can.

**In 2020, the only Olympic open water race will be a 10km, just like every other Olympics since the event's debut in**

**2008 Beijing. Do you prefer the 10km or would you rather have other distances?**

I would love to have the 5km and the 5km mixed relay. If you already have the venue, why not? I think it adds excitement. I think open water would be taken more seriously if there were more events. Right now, I feel like pool swimmers don't take open water seriously. They see it as an ugly stepchild of swimming. I wish people cared about our event more. When they understand it, they are in awe, but until then, no one cares.

**Don't count again! Just go!**

**Let's go back to the 2019 World Championships for a minute. In Gwangju, you took silver in the 10km, but you**

**didn't have to. Did you intend to win the world title? Or were you just trying to qualify for Tokyo and happened to**

**have a great day?**

I was definitely gunning for the podium because in 2015, at the World Championships before Rio, my mindset was to get Top 10 and I think it kind of backfired. In 2015, I thought, 'It's your first 10km at World Championships.' Even though I swam it at the 2012 Olympics, I hadn't swum it at Worlds and 10km at Worlds is a lot different. It's a different field, it's bigger, it's crazier. So in '15, I barely scraped in. I [qualified] ninth. So this time, I was like, 'You've learned a lot over the past few years, you're in a much better position,' so I definitely was gunning for a podium spot.

**The 2019 finish was close, though, wasn't it?**

It was one of the craziest races I've ever been in. You know how swimmers are all about feel? They're always like, 'Oh, I don't feel good in the water.' And coaches always say, 'Don't worry about feel. Save the feelings for your boyfriend.' They love to say that. Well, at no point in that race did I feel good, but this time, I thought, 'It doesn't matter. When you need to

go, go! You never know what can happen.' I think it helped that I wasn't emotional. I was steady and even-keeled. Coming into the last lap, though, I was freaking out because I was trying to count how many people were ahead of me. Then I was like: 'No! We're not doing this again.' This happened before Rio. In 2015, going into the last lap, people slowly passed me one by one. I remember counting. Okay, now I'm fourth. Oh shoot, now I'm sixth. So this time, I was like, 'Don't count again! Just go! Give everything you have!' Then, at the last 800, there were like 10 of us straight across the water in a line and it was a free-for-all. A bunch of girls were getting scrappy. So the last 500 metres, I took my own line and made sure I wasn't around anybody that would just want to fight. I thought, 'Just get some clean water and go for it.' I did, and it worked!

**I know you were unexpectedly introduced to open water swimming when you were in college and you were**

**immediately successful. Do you want to re-tell that story a little bit?**

Catherine [Kase] suggested it. She said, 'Your stroke would be good for open water.' I was like, 'What does that mean? I have a very ugly stroke.' I'm a brute-force type of person. My older sister made everything look very graceful. I make everything look very hard. But I think Catherine also thought I had the temperament and the slight craziness that you need to be an open water swimmer. So I did a little camp in the US, an open water select camp. In 2010, I competed in open water

nationals for the first time and managed to qualify for the 25km at the World Championships in Canada. So my *second-ever*

race was a 25km. That summer, while training for it, Catherine kept telling me the whole time, 'It won't be that bad. Don't worry. It's not that bad.' And afterwards I was like, 'It's not that BAD? Not that BAD? You psycho! It WAS that bad! It was awful!'

**So what kept you from quitting?**

Having the American flag on my cap. I was like, 'I cannot get out!' I have to finish.



**How did you do?**

Fourth place. But I don't tell people that only nine people finished.

**Have you raced a 25km since then?**

I was supposed to do it at the 2011 Worlds in Shanghai, but I pulled out and didn't start.

**One time someone asked me if I was a really big Olympic fan**

**You mentioned your older sister, Alyssa, who retired after winning gold at the 2012 Olympics, but both of your**

**sisters were excellent swimmers. Any chance we'll see the younger one in Tokyo, too?**

Alyssa and I swam 2008 and 2012 US Olympic trials together [in the pool, competing in four of the same events in '08 and one same event in '12]. After Alyssa retired in 2012, I got to swim the 2016 US Olympic Trials with my little sister, Jordan. It was fun to be around for her career as well. She made the 2016 Trials in the 400 IM. She swam for the University of Utah, graduated this year and is done swimming.

**Were the three of you furiously competitive with each other?**

All three of us kind of overlapped in events but we all had different best events. I was definitely more long distance. Alyssa was definitely more 200 free and fly and 400 free. Actually, she could swim anything she wanted to; she's that talented and that annoying. She also had a really good mile, but she wanted to swim other events. Her coach was like, 'If you want to

swim something else, get better at it.’ So her 200 got really good because she didn’t want to swim the mile anymore.

**I noticed that you have the Olympic rings tattooed inside your left wrist. How did you decide to put it there? And**

**what kind of response does it get away from the pool?**

I like having it on my wrist because it was a little different from what everybody else was doing. I don’t mind when people see it, but sometimes it makes me feel awkward. One time someone asked me if I was a really big Olympic fan. I was like, ‘Yes! Huge fan! I love watching!’ Someone else was like, ‘What do those circles mean?’ I was like, ‘Whoa!’ It’s been in my life for so long and I always watched the Olympics, growing up. Most people get it but a handful of people don’t.

**Has anyone ever guessed the wrong event and said, ‘Oh! I saw you in equestrian or curling?’**

I’m 5-foot-10 (178 cm) and I have a lot of tall friends, so people guess volleyball sometimes – maybe because I’m a little blonder, too. I’ve heard soccer, too.



I never win by a mile

**You often say that open water swimming is probably more mental than physical. Do you do any mental training?**

In a two-hour 10km race, it can be a roller-coaster ride. One minute you'll feel like, 'Oh my God, I can sprint away with this right now,' and five minutes later, you can be in the back of the pack like, 'Oh, now I don't feel good.' During a race, I'm always talking to myself, trying to be as calm as possible. But no, I've never done any formal [mental] training. I've always been really tough. And I'm always turning everything into a positive during a race, like, 'Oh, that wasn't a bad decision. It got you here!' Even in practice, I'm good at seeing things as positive instead negative.

**What do you like to think about before a race?**

A lot of sprinters get super-hyped – which is good for them, but different events are so different. People ask me, 'What's your game face?' And I'm like, 'I don't have one because I'm doing a two-hour race and that's serious enough. I do not need to think about it one second longer.' So I'm not being super-serious. Some people are super-peppy, but I'm not the peppiest. I don't listen to music. If I'm listening to music, it means I'm thinking and being in my own head, and I don't want to be in my own head. I just want to hang out.

**During a race what are you known for? Finishing speed? Underwater combat? Rapid stroke rate?**

I don't know what I'm known for. I think I have certain strengths but I don't know what other people think of me. I think I have a good finish. I think I have speed because I have a decent 400 and 800 time. I think I have good finishing speed if I have clean water or if I feel like I'm in a good position. My races always come down to the finish. I never win by a mile.

**Do you like to surge?**

No, not particularly. I like to make sure I'm in a good position, so if that means I need to move up a few more spaces then yeah, but it's more just staying relaxed.

**Do you have any rivals?**

There's a core group of girls who are always competitive. They make everyone better. It is fun to race them, and I like to make sure I race them throughout the year before World Championships or the Olympics.

**Like who?**

I love racing Ana Marcela [Cunha of Brazil]. I like racing the two Italians Ariana [Bridi] and Rachele [Bruni]. Some of the French girls are good. But open water swimming really depends on the day. Some people are very consistent, but you never know who will win. It's not like pool swimming when you have a time and you kind of know who will win if they hit their best time.

**I don't like to be too rigid"**

**Open water races often seem to come down to the last lap. Do you tend to go in with the same strategy as everyone**

**else?**

Everyone has their own race plan, but you have to be really flexible in open water. You can't be like: I need to lead this lap and I need to be in a certain place on that lap. You're not going to get your way in open water, most of the time. So I don't like to be too rigid. For me, it's more about setting up for a good finish, making sure I'm in a good position, and staying comfortable. Otherwise, you'll freak out a bit more if you need things to be a certain way.

**Of all the coaches, team-mates and competitors in your career, who have you learned the most from? And what have**

**you learned?**

In open water, I feel like everyone kind of takes their own path. Everyone has their own way of doing things. I feel like I still learn in every race, and not necessarily from somebody else. You can learn from yourself. You learn how to deal with situations. If I race poorly – or even if I have a good race – there are still things I can improve, which is what makes open water so fun. I don't think I've ever had a perfect race. I don't think I ever will have a perfect race.

**Can you think of a particular race in which you learned the most about yourself? If so, what were the lessons?**

I'm really good at forgetting bad practices or bad races. I don't like to dwell on things as an athlete. But I do remember things I need to work on. I remember this race in Doha [in February], I'm very competitive, but something was missing. I ended up fourth [behind Cunha, Kareena Lee of Australia and Bruni]. In my mind, I was like, 'I'm going to get fourth and it's okay.' I knew I could have finished better. I made mistakes at the end, by committing to a certain line or not committing to any line. At the finish, I was all over the place. In the last 800 metres, I was over here, over there. Next time, I just need to commit and go for it.

**In your career, what has been your highest high or lowest low?**

There have been lots of highs and definitely some lows, like when I almost didn't make the national team in 2013, my first year as a pro, right after the 2012 Olympics. I graduated from USC in 2013 and I thought my first pro summer was going to be so glamorous and fun. No, it's actually harder than I thought. [Even though I had the Olympic silver medal in the 10km] I didn't qualify for the World Championship 10km. I got eighth at our nationals in 10km. So to make the national team I had to come back two days later and win the 5km. I did, and I also ended up winning the 5km at Worlds that summer, so it was about teaching myself how to bounce back and not over-thinking. No one really tells you that being a professional athlete isn't glamorous. It looks glamorous, but it's not.

I feel like I still learn in every race, and not necessarily from somebody else. You can learn from yourself.



(L-R) Silver medallist Haley Anderson of the United States, Gold medallist Xin Xin of China and Bronze medallist Rachele Bruni of Italy pose during the medal ceremony for the Women

