Spotlight on Rowdy Gaines

You may know Rowdy Gaines as the voice of Swimming. He just finished his 7th Olympic Games as a commentator. You may remember Rowdy Gaines as a three-time Olympic gold medalist from the 1984 Olympic Games. After missing his Olympic opportunity at the boycotted 1980 Games, Rowdy won gold in the Men's 100 Freestyle and the 400 Freestyle and 400 Medley Relays in Los Angeles.

But Rowdy's connection to swimming runs much deeper than his Olympic experiences as an athlete or a commentator. For Rowdy, swimming is a life-saving, life-preserving and life-enhancing activity. It provides an avenue for achievement, builds formative relationships and creates a sense of belonging.

Growing up in Winter Haven, Florida, Rowdy learned to swim at a young age and was always in or around water, but he did not immediately pursue it as a sport. After trying and, in Rowdy's words, "failing at" five different sports in high school, he decided to give the swim team a try as a junior. He was going to try out as a sophomore but was too embarrassed to go to the team meeting with all of the swimmers who had been in the sport for years.

Rowdy made the team, quickly showed talent for sprinting and began a rapid rise to the top of the swimming world, winning at the state, then national and international levels, setting records in the process. Despite his impressive list of accomplishments, Rowdy is quick to say that the value of his swimming experience has nothing to do with the records or medals. "The Olympic gold medal didn't teach me anything, the journey did," explains Rowdy. "It's all about the journey. That's what teaches the lessons. If I didn't win gold, it still would have been worth it."

He credits his coaches, teammates and family for creating a supportive community in which he could succeed, fail and learn from both experiences. In Rowdy's perspective, it all starts at home. "I received unconditional love. Nothing had to do with how I performed in the pool. I wasn't treated differently by my family," he reflects. He also credits his coaches with teaching him to believe in himself. "Youth can be fragile and swimming demands a lot. You need others to believe in you and be positive. I never heard can't and don't and won't," says Rowdy. Along with his teammates, they created an environment in which he could thrive. "It is important to surround people who have same goals, who believe in the same things and have same values."

Rowdy's work today stems from his understanding of the impact that swimming can have on someone's life. As a spokesperson for the USA Swimming Foundation and the Vice President for Competitive Aquatics at the YMCA of Central Florida, Rowdy promotes swimming on a daily basis. He raises money and awareness for swimming lessons, drowning prevention and avenues for competitive achievement in the sport. The statistics are well known – drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death for children age 14 and younger. Seventy percent of African American children, 60% of Hispanic children and up to 40% of Caucasian children don't know how to swim. But learning to swim is not just a lifesaving skill, it can be empowering as well. "It builds confidence in a child or young person. You gain a sense of power and control when you learn how to swim," says Rowdy. Whether through swim lessons or a swim team program, swimming provides a classroom for important life lessons.

Rowdy Gaines is often called "Swimming's Greatest Ambassador," and given the positive impact he has had on swimming and through swimming, it is an accurate moniker. But Rowdy would argue that swimming, and the coaches, teammates and families involved in it have made an even greater impact on him. He still swims almost every day and enjoys being part of the Masters Swimming community, promoting the benefits of swimming to adults as well as children. You can read more about Rowdy's journey in Rowdy Rising: From Rejected to Unrivaled by Dainon Moody. And watch for Rowdy's enthusiastic coverage of upcoming national swimming broadcasts.