

Fresh. (on skiing)

Once an Olympian

IT'S A LIFELONG LABEL—WHETHER YOU WANT IT OR NOT. *By Edie Thys Morgan*

The motto of the U.S. Olympians

Association, the phrase featured on every issue of *The Olympian* magazine, is this: "Once an Olympian, Always an Olympian. Never Former; Never Past." I'm good with that. But being an Olympian isn't something you dwell on daily.

It doesn't offer the security of a trust fund, a royal title, or a job later as a television commentator. But it has its bennies—like piles of clothing with Olympic logos, the free trip to the White House to shake hands with the President, invitations to celebrity athletic events, and an annual place of honor in your community's Fourth of July parade.

But those perks pale in comparison to the memory of walking into the Opening Ceremonies behind your country's flag to deafening applause. That one moment, and the magnitude of the struggles, triumphs, and emotions it encapsulates, is priceless.

All of this might go to one's head were it not for children—nature's way of keeping our egos in check. When my two boys were old enough to understand the Olympics, they were momentarily puffed up that their mother was in this exclusive club. This could be leveraged as street cred in elementary school. But soon, the topic of medals came up, along with an interrogation by my six-year-old. "Did you win a medal?" "No." "Did you win a medal?" "No." "Did you win a medal?" "No!" Then, in a pained voice, "Not even a *bronze*?!" I did ski in the 1988 and 1992 Games, and my ninth-place finish in Calgary was the top for any U.S. skier. Unfortunately, they don't give medals for "the best the U.S. could muster."

The humility brought on by children is good for us, and especially good for aging Olympians, because the Once-an-Olympian-Always-an-Olympian thing is more than a motto. Having that distinction means living with an assumption that you are somehow qualified to do everything well.



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That can lead to disappointment, as it did in my brief attempt at rec softball. While slinking away from a bad at bat, I overheard one player whispering, "She was in the *Olympics*?" More often, it's a motivator to take on small challenges. Whether pausing to demonstrate the proper form launching off a kicker or mustering the nerve to launch off a rock at the swimming hole, the reminder "C'mon, Mom, you raced *downhill* in the *Olympics*" is enough to shame me into action.

Being an Olympian means playing the role even in your *way* post-Olympic condition. It means being the standard against which middle-aged athletes can measure themselves, and becoming the self-esteem booster of every runner, biker, and superfit yummy-mummy who has an itch to

kick an Olympian's (expanding) butt.

On such occasions, I'm tempted to point out that I got that competitive thing out of my system 20-plus years ago, honey. Instead I smile as Olympically as possible and say, "Thanks! See you next week," because like most Olympians I have more experience with *not* winning than with winning.

There's truth in the assertion that "Success is not the act of never falling—it is the act of repeatedly getting up." Being an Olympian feels less like an accomplishment than a privilege considering the sheer luck that goes into the process. Nothing happens without hard work, but every Olympian knows there's a degree of capriciousness that comes into play. We're grateful that we didn't get hurt, or fall in a key race, or just have a run of misfortune. Many things in and out of your control have to fall in place to make it to the Games. "That's what makes it special," my husband reminds me.

Beyond easy cocktail chatter, what does being an Olympian mean? For sure, it's part inspiration and (probably more often) part burden for my kids, considering the expectations it inevitably instills. It's a stash of dated outerwear used now only for theme parties. A teammate put it well on the eve of the 1992 Albertville Games. When asked by an interviewer what the Olympics meant to her, she said "It's a bonus. It's a total bonus."

Every four years I get invited to talk about the Olympics in front of a class of kids who are either in awe or bored to death...you never really know which. But they're polite and write thank-you notes, and hopefully, somewhere deep inside, they feel the tiniest seed of possibility, an inkling that someday they could march into a huge stadium to the roar of fans and get into one of the few clubs that will never, ever kick them out. ●

Edie Thys Morgan is a writer, ski coach, and mother of two racing boys. Her most recent book is Shut Up and Ski: Wipeouts, Shootouts and Blowouts on the trail to the Olympic Dream.