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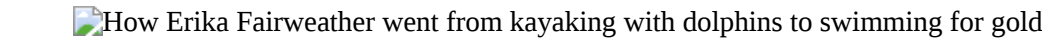






# How Erika Fairweather went from kayaking with dolphins to swimming for gold

Theme:  
Youth



Co-authored by Paul Cully, The Press

Erika Fairweather (Ngāi Tahu) was destined to spend her life in the water.

The 20-year-old grew up in Macandrew Bay on the rugged and beautiful Otago peninsula in Dunedin, and her mother Emma is a diving instructor.

Long before she developed a gift for swimming that is about to take her to a second Olympics, some of Fairweather’s core childhood memories reflect her love of the harbour in the southern city.

“I have these memories of my mum waking us up in the evening in the summer and there were dolphins in the harbour,” Fairweather says.

“We just crossed the street and went kayaking in our pyjamas with the dolphins.

“After school one day there were a couple of whales down at Weller’s Rock [on the peninsula] and we all packed into a car, me and some of my friends.

“Mum drove us down there and then we sat on the wall for ages and just watched these two whales that were right in front of us. It was crazy.”

Fairweather’s eyes light up as she tells the story, with its connection to both whānau and nature. In a week’s time she will be on the world stage at the Olympics in Paris, dealing with all the pressures of high-performance sport, but her foundations will forever be in Ōtepoti.

## No shortcuts

Fairweather is in Paris as part of New Zealand’s nine-strong swimming team. She will compete in four events, the women’s 200m freestyle, the women's 400m freestyle, the women's 800m freestyle and the women’s 4 x 200m freestyle relay.

Fairweather won gold in the 400m event at the world championships in Qatar earlier this year, silver in the 200m and bronze in the 800m.

That medal haul has raised hopes she will stand on the podium in Paris, although major rivals Ariarne Titmus (Australia), Katie Ledecky (USA) Summer McIntosh (Canada) did not take part in the world championships.

There are no shortcuts to getting to Fairweather’s level, and when we talk she is in a heavy block of training that is full of the brutal and unglamorous realities of Olympic athletes.

Her alarm goes off at 4:30am every day in the cold and dark Dunedin winter and she clocks up 50 kilometres a week at Moana Pool in central Dunedin, as well as gym work at the High Performance Sport NZ facility in Dunedin - where the Highlanders also train - to make sure her body can cope with the stress it is dealing with.

Fairweather admits the early starts test her willpower, and she frequently delays saying goodbye to her warm duvet.

“I'm the worst at that,” she says. ”I’m in bed for 10 minutes before I even contemplate getting up. I definitely have to do some convincing some days.”

Tellingly, though, there is no knock on the door from her parents, mum Emma or dad Mark, or sister Jade.

Their support is unwavering - “unmatched” is how Fairweather puts it - but it also came with a classic slice of Kiwi common sense parenting, and a lesson that has served Fairweather well.

“From a young age, before I could drive to the pool, my mum always said to me, ‘If you want to go to the pool, you have to do it yourself’,” Fairweather says.

“I always had to wake up my parents. I had to prove that I wanted to be there and committed to the cause.

“I think I've kind of just learnt from that and I've continued that. So now it's on me if I don't show up and I'm letting myself down.”

## Hard choices



Emma and Mark will be in Paris to cheer on their daughter - work commitments will keep Jade in New Zealand - and while Fairweather's swimming teammates are also a form of family, she makes it clear that her parents fulfil a unique role.

She hears them in the stands - "they're loud" - but it's their ability as listeners away from the arena that really nourishes Fairweather.

"I definitely couldn't do what I do without them," she says.

"They don't fully understand swimming, but they've gotten there over the years.

"So I'm able to have conversations with them and they can hear me out if I've had a bad day.

"They offer support, not feedback, which is quite nice because you can just vent to them.

"They're the supportive cushion. They're there to hold you up when you need it. They're never going to be harsh. They're just going to comfort you."

That level of unconditional backing is invaluable because Fairweather has had to let go of things that are important to her to pursue her swimming.

Some of those sacrifices are tangible - such as a lie-in - but it goes deeper than that. Fairweather's natural competitiveness extended from the pool to the classroom, but learning to let go was an unavoidable part of her teenage years when her friends and peers simply didn't have to make those decisions.

"I think there was a turning point when I was 17 or 18 where I realised I couldn't be good at everything without compromising something," she says.

"I couldn't be good at all my school work and want to be the best swimmer ever.

"It didn't match up very well. I was like, 'Right, if I want to do something I have to put all my effort in here and do it properly.

"And that's when I kind of chose swimming."

Those hard choices still persist. Fairweather's love of the outdoors due to her childhood on the peninsula led her to a part-time Bachelor of Science, majoring in environmental science, at Massey University.

In time, it points to a role in conservation, one of her passions. But she has put that on ice this year, with a plan to pick it up again after a good post-Olympics break. Life goes on hold for Olympians.

The pressure to perform has been building over the last couple of years, she says. A pressure she is relishing.

"I flew under the radar for a really long time. Being from New Zealand, we don't have a great history of amazing swimmers. We do have our Danyon Loaders and our Lauren Boyles but we're not renowned for swimming.

"But I really love swimming in front of a crowd. I love feeding off the energy that the crowd brings."

## **A new star**

Despite Fairweather's growing status on the world stage, she remains completely unaffected.

There isn't even the slightest hint of an inflated ego, and she almost has to be guided into acknowledging that she has already achieved something special.

Fairweather describes a natural progression from "baby classes" in Dunedin to competitive swimming at 11, then regional swim meets in Southland or Central Otago, and onto the national stage, with a realisation at the age of 14 that she really had the talent to match her natural love of competing.

Even then, the Olympics were a dream rather than a goal and her qualification for the Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled for 2020 but held in 2021 due to Covid-19, came early for the-then teenager, who was still studying at Kavanagh College in Dunedin at the time.

But her performances captured the nation's attention, particularly when she broke the New Zealand record in the 400m freestyle and qualified for the final. Aotearoa had a new star.

Yet, as her profile grew, Fairweather also had to put some thought into how she wanted to interact with those who recognise her - and looked up to her.

No one provides a manual on how to do that, but Fairweather recalls a meeting with Kiwi rowing legend Hamish Bond that has provided a blueprint of sorts.

"I met Hamish Bond at the last Olympics and that was such a cool moment for me," she says.



"I obviously grew up watching him in the rowing. We had some conversations ... and the way he carries himself and interacts with people: he has a lot of time for people, which I thought was really cool.

"Some athletes don't interact with the kids they see or pretty quickly walk on and just focus solely on what they're doing, whereas I felt like the way he conducted himself was just way more community-orientated than other people I had seen in the past."

Years later Bond's example remains fresh in her mind, much to the benefit of Dunedin kids splashing around in Moana Pool beside their heroine.

"We actually train alongside little kids," Fairweather laughs.

"We've got three Olympians [in Dunedin] and in the lane next to us there'll be a couple nine-year-olds, just flapping around a little bit.

"We have daily interactions with multiple people who either are from the swimming community or not.

"We don't always have time to have a big conversation with them, but even saying hello or giving them a wave or a smile, or poking your tongue out at someone...they love that stuff and they absolutely feed off it


"It makes them want to come back and I think that's the cool thing."


From Bond to Fairweather and on to the next set of aspiring Olympians: the baton is in very safe hands.


Paris Summer Olympics, July 26 - August 11

- Sunday Magazine

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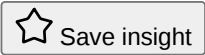
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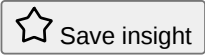
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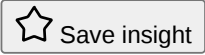
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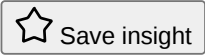
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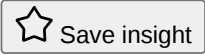
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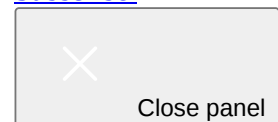
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