

Athlete's perseverance is a matter of Heart

Olivia Goodwin was a lap down before her race started. The young woman started swimming competitively at an early age, but she was at a decided disadvantage from the start. She does not have a normal functioning heart.

Now at 15 years old, Olivia was found to have a life-threatening heart defect before she was born. Her first heart surgery, the installation of a pacemaker, came only three days after she was born. She will have a pacemaker the rest of her life, although they have to be changed approximately every five years.

Setback? Not really. Olivia took to the water as a baby and loved swimming ever since. As she grew, so did the love of competition.

Often that competition was with herself – improvement, discipline, and perseverance were more important than ribbons and medals.

Olivia's mother, Marisa Goodwin, said expectations are to be better today than yesterday. What started as an introduction to swimming as a life skill took off because Olivia felt at home in the water.

“We were participating in swimming, but the beauty of it for her was that ‘I know I'm not going to win. I know that but I want to finish and that's my goal to be better than I was at the last competition,’” Marisa said.

When Olivia swam at the 2021 Commonwealth Games she did not win a medal. She did, however, impress the organizers and competitors enough to be named the 2021 Youth Athlete of the Year. With that honor, Olivia was automatically nominated for the same award on the national level, and she won that, too, being named National Youth Athlete of the Year. She didn't win those honors for her times in the pool; she won them for her tenacity.

Participants in the 2022 Games saw her light the cauldron at Opening Ceremonies. Marisa said she learned about the Commonwealth Games while at a meet hosted by their team, the Atlantic Coast Athletic Club.

The Games were enjoyable, featuring camaraderie and encouragement along with competition. “They all want those medals, but they cheer for each other, too,” Marisa said. “Olivia's two younger sisters won medals, and she was as happy for them as she could be.”

The Goodwins enjoy the fact that the Games foster friendships among athletes who see each other year after year.

This month, Olivia will be back in the pool for another Commonwealth Games swim meet, but now there's an added event. She will return in July to compete in the track meet, too.

Three years ago, Olivia joined a fledgling running program, and the sport clicked with her.





“She's got a knack for it, and she likes it,” Marisa said. “She still swims, and she still likes it, but track has really gotten her. She just enjoys it, and I don't know if it's something to conquer or what, but her passion now is the running.”

While competing in swimming meant the competition was more internal, Olivia's skills as a runner are strong enough that she's ranked nationally in middle distance. She will miss the final day of the Games' swim meet to go to a national track meet in Greensboro. She also has aspirations of running in college with a goal of making the Olympic trials.

The internal wiring that comes with having a pacemaker is delicate enough that there are limitations to the sports she can play, but sports like swimming and running are allowable and suit Olivia's personality perfectly. She can't call for a substitute, nor does she want to.

While most pacemakers regulate a person's heart rate, Olivia's does not – it makes sure the bottom chamber of the heart is in sync with the top chamber, allowing Olivia to push herself as much as she desires. Marisa said the pacemaker's battery is wearing out faster than expected because she works so hard in her athletic endeavors.

“The goal is to be a normal kid,” Marisa says. “We're not going to limit her just to preserve battery life.”