

Victor Davis



It was June 1984, just before the Olympic Games in Los Angeles that Victor Davis shaved more time off his world record for the 200-metre breaststroke. The Waterloo athlete raised a clenched fist when he realized he'd improved his time to 2:14:58 from 2:14:77.

However, outside of the pool, Davis said boldly, "I can go a lot faster than that. I wasn't gunning for the world record. I was just out to have a real good swim."

True to form, the young man who was training with the Region of Waterloo Swim Team went on to set a new world record - 2:13:34 - in his best event to win Olympic gold. That shining summer Davis also won Olympic silver in the 100-metre breaststroke and the 4x100-metre medley relay.

Davis, who was born in Guelph, trained first with the Guelph Marlin Aquatic Club. However, when ROW swimming coach Clifford Barry saw Davis' breaststroke in 1976 he eventually convinced him to move to Waterloo and train with him.

"I looked at him and I said, 'This kid is awesome.' I couldn't believe the beautiful breaststroke he had. That was my first impression. It was that this kid had talent," said Barry.

Davis was first noticed internationally when he set a world record for the 200-metre breaststroke at the world championships in Ecuador in 1982. During that year he also set a Commonwealth record in the same event during an Australian meet.

Davis became known as the fiercest competitor on the entire Canadian Olympic Team that year. When he won Olympic gold for Canada in 1984 it was a momentous medal because the swim team had not won an Olympic gold medal for 72 years.

In the heady moments after Davis won the gold, his assistant coach Dean Boles said, "It's the greatest thing that's ever happened to Kitchener-Waterloo. We've had hockey starts but this is fantastic."

Davis' competitive drive and steely confidence had two sides to it. The same spirit that made him euphoric in times of victory caused him problems in times of defeat. A legendary incident in 1982 involved Davis kicking a deck chair and storming out of the pool at the Commonwealth Games in Australia. He was enraged by the disqualification of his 4x100 medley relay team for a premature start.

The media soon took him to task for the outburst, which was made worse by the presence of Queen Elizabeth II in the stands.

When Davis' long-time coach Cliff Barry left ROW to take over the head-coaching job at the Pointe Claire Swim Club near Montreal, Davis went with him. At the time, Davis said, "It would be silly to change to a new coach now after all we've done. Cliff and I have had our spats but it's grown to be quite a relationship."

Tragedy struck in 1989 when Davis was killed by a car in Ste. Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec. The local swimming community was devastated by the loss of one of its best, and memorials were held by many. A \$5,000 bursary in Davis' name was established and a Victor Davis Award for Excellence is presented annually to a high school athlete from Waterloo Region that competes internationally.

Davis was Swimming Canada's Athlete of the Year in 1982, 1984 and 1986. He was inducted into the Canadian Amateur Sports Hall of Fame and is a member of the Order of Canada.

After his death a Guelph columnist wrote: "People remember Victor for his ferocious competitiveness and as a result his success was sometimes dismissed as the luck of raw talent. But like great jazz artists, he had a singular dedication to perfecting his craft."

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