

Heartbreak and loss may come with any high-stakes sport, but Olympians also experience an unrivaled sense of accomplishment, camaraderie and joy.

by Megan Michelson

Beyond the Gold





**MILES CHAMLEY-WATSON,
FENCER**

“It used to be thought people became happy by having success. But pinning your happiness on winning a gold medal isn’t how it works. People succeed by being happy first.”

—Caroline Miller

that athletes with positive psychological states—those who are relaxed, at ease, having fun—physically perform better in competitive settings than those with negative emotions.

“If an athlete’s overall sense of well-being and happiness is within a suitable range, they tend to perform better based on the fact that their perceived level of stress is reduced and their subjective belief is ‘I’m doing well,’” says Jason Richardson, a former World Champion and Pan-Am Games gold medalist in BMX racing, who is now a psychologist working with Olympic athletes. “Those beliefs become the driving force, as they precede the feelings and actions that ultimately bring results.”

You don’t have to be an Olympian to gain something from this lesson: Enjoy yourself and you’ll do better at whatever it is you set out to do.

Less Stress, More Success

Miles Chamley-Watson, 26, just missed the podium at the London Olympic Games. A fencer, he was ranked No. 2 in the world entering the 2012 Olympics, and he was aiming for gold. But he was defeated in the second round and wound up in fourth place in men’s foil.

“I wanted to come away with hardware, so I wasn’t happy,” says Miles, who was born in London but moved to New York when he was 9 and will be a top fencing competitor this summer in Rio. “It was incredibly frustrating. It was my first time at the Olympics and everything felt magnetized and blown out of proportion.”

In a study that looked at the emotional reactions of Olympic medalists at the 1992 Games in Barcelona, Spain, researchers found that silver medalists were reportedly less happy than those who took bronze. Why?

“The silver medalists feel like they are so close to winning, but just missed the

mark, whereas the bronze medalists are just happy to get a medal,” says Caroline Miller, an expert on positive psychology and the author of seven books on the subject, including her upcoming book, *Getting Grit*. “There are people who win and they feel empty afterward. They think it will bring them happiness but the Olympics don’t buy you happiness.”

Just as Miles has found through the extensive mental training he’s done to prepare for this summer’s Olympics, the more stressed he is in the midst of a competition, the less likely he will perform at his best. Whereas the more joyful and relaxed, the better he’ll do. In other words, happiness begets success, not the other way around.

“It used to be thought people became happy by having success. But pinning your happiness on winning a gold medal isn’t how it works,” Caroline says. “People succeed by being happy first. Their bodies are relaxed and in a different state of consciousness. They’ve done all the preparation they need to do and they’re utterly confident and relaxed about it. They’re not constricted or anxious.”

We can’t all be Olympic fencers, but we can learn from Miles. “Do whatever makes you happy. Don’t let anyone tell you no. Above all, take risks,” Miles says. “I’ve taken so many risks in my life and that’s what’s gotten me where I’m at now.”

Caroline says it’s those risks that bring such a high level of joy. “The reason why the highs are so high and the lows are so low is that these athletes take risks and because of the intensity of passion that they bring to their lives and their sport,” she says. “They’ve invested so much and they’ve given up so much in order to pursue their craft.”

Sure, getting fourth place may not feel great, but Miles, who, in 2013,

became the first American fencer to win an individual World Championship title, also knows what victory feels like. “There’s no feeling like when you work really hard for something and the training actually pays off,” he says. “You win a competition and there’s no other feeling like it in the world.”

A 2009 report in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* found that those who attempt to master a new skill may be frustrated or stressed throughout the process, but they have greater happiness long term.

“Very few of us can be Olympians. But we can all learn from what these men and women bring to their sport—they live with joy, they live with a sense of satisfaction,” Caroline says. “At the end of every day, we scan our days for what we did that was hard. We’re only proud of ourselves when we did something out of our comfort zone. We all need to have something we’re passionate about, something that lights us up, something that makes us work for it.”

Happiness in Sync

Leading up to this summer’s Games in Brazil, synchronized swimming duet partners Anita Alvarez and Mariya Koroleva often spend 24 hours a day together. They’re in the pool training for long hours, they sleep in the same hotel room, and they have meals side by side.

“We start to understand each other and we learn everything about each other,” says Anita, who at age 19 will be making her Olympic debut. “It’s important to have that bond and connection not just in the pool but also outside the pool. I can’t imagine going into this intense competition without her there.”



ANITA ALVAREZ AND MARIYA KOROLEVA,
SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING DUET PARTNERS

“It’s nice to have someone going through the exact same thing as you, especially in the hard times, after a long training day,” adds Mariya, 26, who competed at the 2012 Olympics with a different duet partner and placed 11th. “After you compete together and you have a good score, it’s even more exciting to be able to share it with someone. It’s not just your success.”

Studies have shown that athletes who train in groups are more motivated and experience less pain than those who train alone. Plus, they’re happier. “People are happier when they’re training and celebrating their victories with other people. They need a team around them,” Caroline says. “It’s not just about getting what you want, it’s about getting what you want and celebrating with someone else.”

Mariya, who was born in Russia but moved to the U.S. as a child, underwent back surgery just six months before her last Olympic appearance. She was forced to rush her recovery process in order to compete at the last Olympics and during the Games, she loaded up

on pain medication to ease the throbbing in her back. But still, she says, it was worth it for that feeling of walking in the opening ceremony and knowing she had made it.

“It’s important to remember nothing that you accomplish that’s great is going to be easy,” Mariya says. “If you’re having a hard time, remember that it’s supposed to be hard. You have to keep pushing through and fighting for what you want. The harder it is, the happier you’re going to be.”

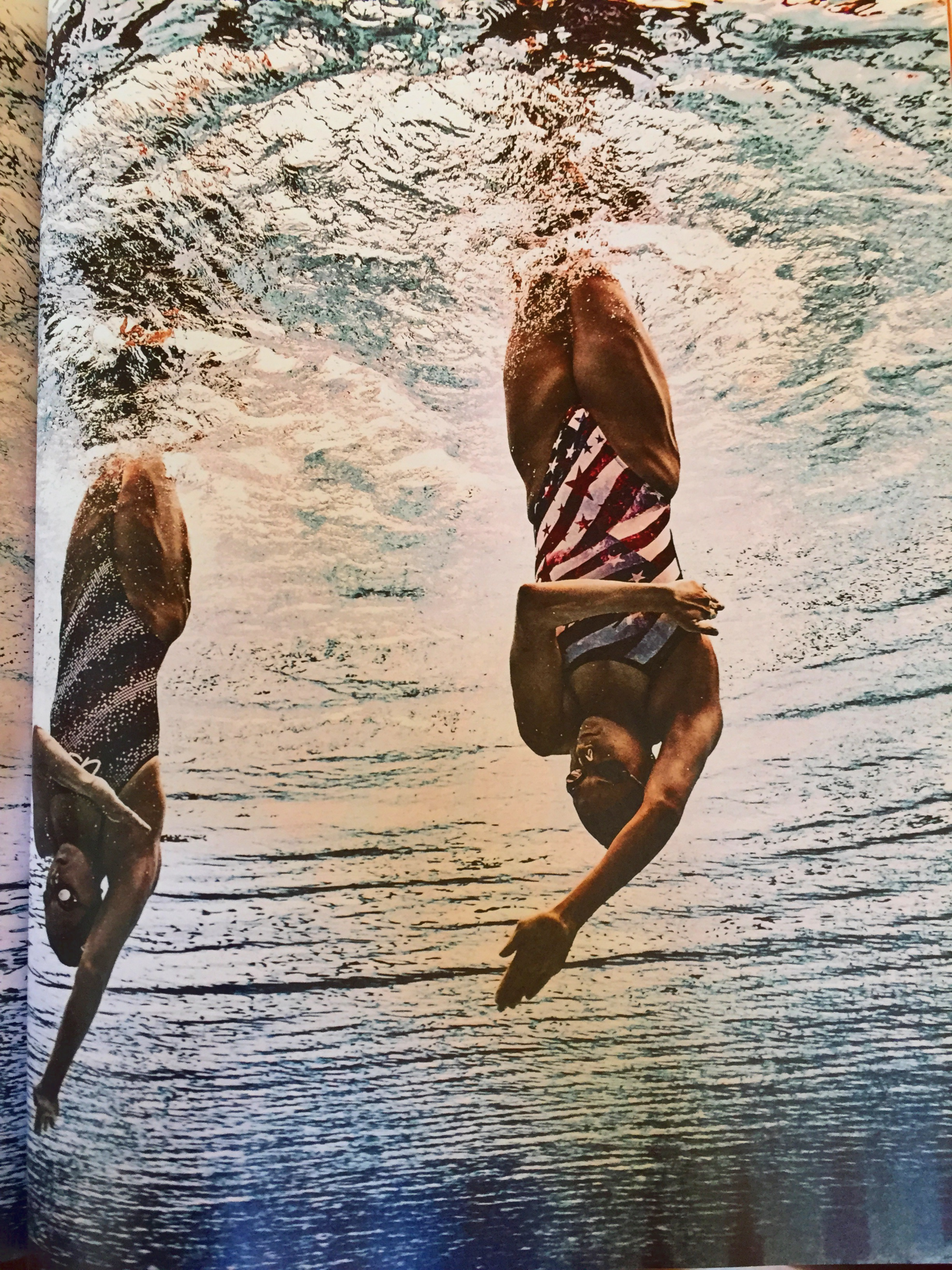
Jason says there’s science behind this, too. “When an athlete suffers injury or great loss and finds victory again, it’s more meaningful,” he says, “because the true win is not just in their sport, but also the internal struggle within themselves.”

The Meaningful Life

Mountain biker Lea Davison competed at her first Olympic Games in 2012 in London, and she’s on track to race again this summer in Rio. In London, she

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—Mariya Koroleva





LEA DAVISON,
MOUNTAIN BIKER

The third and deepest level of happiness Martin calls the meaningful life, which is when we use our powers for the greater good. That, Lea says, took longer for her to find.

Lea graduated college in 2005 and dedicated herself to a career as a professional mountain biker. In 2008, she and her sister, Sabra, decided to start a nonprofit organization called Little Bellas, which aimed to get young girls in their home state of Vermont into mountain biking. The program took off and they now have chapters nationwide to introduce girls ages 7 to 13 to the sport they love. Little Bellas is what helped Lea find her most meaningful life.

"It's worthy to go after your goals and see how far you can push yourself, but it's essentially a very selfish pursuit. It's all about how fast I can turn the pedals over,"

she says. "But helping these young girls become themselves and figure out what they can do, that is what brings me true happiness."

"As an athlete matures, he or she begins to recognize a world that is bigger than just them," Jason adds. "Even the best do not find as much meaning in just performing well in the arena when they become older and wiser. This is not to say that they are no longer competitive. It is to say that winning doesn't have the same meaning as it did when they were a rookie."

Cycling, Lea says, has provided her with many life lessons. "I could get wrapped up in all the details and be very narrow focused," she says. "But sometimes, you have to just step back and look up from the trail and realize how beautiful this place is. You have to

take in the bigger picture because there's always something to be grateful for."

So we can't all be Olympians, but we can watch them from afar, cheer for them as they take on the hurdles of their competition. We can take a piece of their experience and let it inspire us to live more meaningful lives.

"We all should tune into the Olympics because those are the people who are taking risks and putting it all on the line," Caroline says. "When you see people giving it their best, you become awed and inspired. And when you're awed, people tend to look up, figuratively and emotionally. It causes people to want to be better than they are already." 