



UNDER PRESSURE – Not just another day at the office

by Nikki Stone

I was once asked what the most appropriate song would be to represent the athlete's emotions at the Olympic Games -- and the only song to pop in my head was David Bowie and Queen's song "Under Pressure". I don't think the general public realizes the burden that a young athlete has in qualifying for an event that comes once every four years. Meeting the expectations of a world of encouraging spectators with hopes of your bringing home a shiny medal for the US that means more than the lifetime of work put into it.

Qualifying for a spot on the illustrious Olympic team can be as nerve-wracking as the Olympic competition itself. Often times, hundreds and thousands of American athletes are fighting for the 3-4 spots delegated to each Olympic discipline -- and many a friendship has been lost in the process. To make matters worse, the selection procedure can be drawn out until a few days before the athletes are to walk into the Opening Ceremonies. So much energy is expended on qualifying for the Games that many athletes are burnt-out by the time the actual Olympic competition rolls around!

Since the Olympics only come every four years, many sports are receiving vastly more attention than they do in their everyday competitions. The athletes are suddenly thrust into a media world that can be quite foreign. Actors and Actresses might not like the paparazzi, but at least they are used to reporters following them into grocery stores or catching them as they leave the restrooms. Athletes suddenly realize that "bringing home the Gold" is not only their hope, but their country's expectation as well.

I remember the day of my Aerial Skiing Olympic finals in 1998 vividly. I arrived at the hill to encouraging screams of "We're counting on you, Nikki" and "If you can't bring home the Gold, than no one can". Now, of course, this was inspiring, but it also provoked feelings that if I didn't perform well, then I'd be letting down all the fans, and the entire United States. Everywhere I turned, there was a camera less than 12 inches from my face. Suddenly, the winds picked up and I wondered if I'd turn into a kite as I launched myself off the jumps flipping and twisting 50 feet in the air. The wind was still gusting in pre-competition training, but we couldn't push back the competition, as there was a World waiting to see LIVE coverage of the event. As I took my place for my first competitive jump, I looked down the hill to see a camera pivot in front of the jumps on a giant swinging boom. All the time, I'd been trying to quash the thoughts of appearances on David Letterman, Jay Leno and the Today Show, hometown parades, worldwide endorsements, and even more if I'm successful. Luckily for me, the psychology classes,

the sports psychologist, the experience, the hard work, the determination, and possibly the alignment of the stars all seemed to work in my favor for those 3 seconds. I did get to bring home that shiny gold medal for the US that means much more than the lifetime of work put into it.

I know, personally, from both successful and tragic Olympic experiences, that once the Games are over, no matter what the outcome, there's always a feeling of being able to exhale after you've held your breathe for eight months. So if NBC produces a video with a montage of Olympic athletes, set to the song "Under Pressure", you may now understand the significance.

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