

Simone Manuel Is Always Swimming Toward Her Next Goal

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Like many Olympians, Team Toyota athlete [Simone Manuel](#) uses her Olympic medals as motivation to continue pursuing her goals. But the elite swimmer doesn't keep her hardware on display — she keeps her Olympic medals in a safe place.

“My parents never did that,” says Manuel, 23. “They never made it a priority to display all of our awards around the house. I think it kind of helped my brothers and me remain driven and not get complacent.”

Manuel, who specializes in sprint freestyle, qualified for her first Olympics in 2016 and won two gold and two silver medals in Rio. While those medals will stay tucked away until she is finished swimming competitively, the impact of her win is already on display: Manuel is the first African-American woman to win an individual Olympic gold medal in the sport of swimming.

“Rio 2016 was the experience of a lifetime,” she says. “I just had the time of my life representing Texas and Team USA as a part of a history-making swim team.”



Diving In Head First

Though an athlete as a child, Manuel started swimming for practical reasons: Her parents wanted their children to know how to swim so they'd be safer in the water.

“The drowning rates are very high for children,” she says. “Especially for African-Americans, who are five and a half times more likely to drown than other children. It’s an epidemic. My parents didn’t want to be a part of that statistic.”

Swimming came easily to Manuel, and soon she fell in love with it and it became her sole focus.

“Even though I tried other sports, I was drawn to swimming,” she says. “Being in the water is a kind of therapy for me. It’s what I always wanted to do.”

Manuel also loves the sport for its challenges. With one of the best swim teams in the world, qualifying for Team USA is extremely difficult, with swimmers from all over the country gathering at Olympic trials for 8 days of intense competition.

“The process for the Olympics is very grueling,” Manuel says. “Team USA is competitive across the board, so you really go up against the best of the best during Trials. Many people say it’s harder than the actual Olympics.”

Though she was surprised by her first Olympics because she was so successful, Manuel feels a little bit more prepared heading into 2020, but the process to make the Olympic team still keeps her on her toes.

“Even though I have a little bit of experience with that pressure, I never want to take the process for granted,” she says. “I still get nervous. But I’m looking forward to it and really working towards my goals.”

Eyes on the Prize

While Manuel was sure to celebrate her accomplishments and take a short break after Rio 2016, it wasn’t long until she was back in the pool.

“I think all athletes are kind of like, ‘Great, we’ve reached that target. Let’s get the next one,’” she says. “I decided that I don’t want to be ‘Only Rio.’ I want to stay driven and focus on what’s next.

But for Manuel, working towards her goals requires not only the physical training, but mental effort as well. As a Team USA swimmer, Manuel knows that she has to continue to work hard and perform well to remain on top. With that comes managing expectations and external pressures.

“My goals are my goals, and I can’t let other outside factors hinder me from achieving them,” she says. “I won’t let anything like that define my career. That’s what mobility means to me: the ability to go after everything without any restrictions.”

“I’m a firm believer that representation matters,” she says. “I really want to inspire little boys and girls, especially minorities or people who have not always felt welcome, to get in the water. I want kids to be able to see themselves in me.”

To learn more about Simone Manuel, [click here](#)