



Omar Haddad

Omar Haddad has competed in the sport of gymnastics for most of his life and now at the age of age 24 is recognised as a veteran of the gymnastics circuit. Omar is like any other gymnast except he had Downs Syndrome, and just like every other gymnast Omar competes on all gymnastics pieces namely Floor, Vault, Parallel Bars, Rings, High Bar and Pommels.



Gymnastics is a sport which demands much of any athlete. They must demonstrate a unique combination of skills. They must perform with grace yet demonstrate enormous strength. They must be flexible but have tension and the conditioning to hold difficult static strength moves. And above all they must show great stamina and the ability to hold their nerve during big national competitions with hundreds of people looking on and a bank of gymnastic judges who are scrutinising and examining every aspect of their routine. Success is measured by tenths of a point, with the slightest bend of the arm or tiny waver during a balance being marked down.

Omar has been training in gymnastics for most of his life. Thousands of hours honing and developing his strength and technique was rewarded when he returned from the XIII World Special Olympic Games held in Athens in 2011 with five gold and two bronze medals, one of the highest medal tallies ever recorded by a British gymnast at World Level.

Omar continues to develop his sport, pushing forward the boundaries of what athletes with Downs Syndrome are thought to be capable of.



Omar is unusual in as much he is also British Gymnastics disability Sports Acrobatics Champion in the sport of Wheelchair Sports Acrobatics. He has achieved national success in two completely different gymnastics disciplines. Although not a wheelchair user himself Omar has partnered up with Vicky Perez who is a former Special Olympic World Champion herself and who became a wheelchair user about 9 years ago. Both Omar and Victoria perform at the most difficult Level C Wheelchair routines and are recognised as being the most successful wheelchair sports acrobatic pair in the history of the sport.

Omar and Vicky both train at the nationally renowned Cheshire Academy of Integrated Sport and Arts in Crewe. It has a reputation of producing some of the top disability rhythmic, artistic and sports acrobatic gymnasts in the country. Omar is currently training hard for the next GB national special Olympic Games to be held in Bath during the summer of 2013. With a completely new set of routines to learn for these games he is training hard to master a whole new class of difficult skills and strength moves.

In recognition of his abilities and his contribution to his sport, Omar was recently selected by Special Olympics GB to carry the Olympic Torch. It is an irony that although he was allowed to carry



the torch, gymnasts like himself, with a learning disability, are actually not allowed to enter the 2012 Olympic or Paralympic games. That is reserved for athletes with physical or sensory disabilities. If you have Downs Syndrome, and you are a gymnast, you are just not allowed to enter. It is through Special Olympics and the Cheshire Academy in Crewe, organisations geared to the development of Sport for athletes with learning or intellectual disabilities, that Omar has been able to thrive and develop.

Iain Chalmers, head gymnastics coach at the Cheshire Academy understands what motivates athletes such as Omar.

“Everywhere we look we see images of sporting heroes. On billboards; in magazines and on TV. They are given a special status in society, and elevated to great heights, and it is little wonder youngsters all over the country try to emulate the success of their heroes. Athletes with disabilities are no different. They also want to achieve sporting success and Omar, like all top athletes fortunately has the will, determination, drive and the talent to succeed. With the unstinting support and help of his family he is prepared to put in the time and effort, to practice and repeat skills over and over again to try and achieve perfection. It is the drive towards perfection that motivates all top athletes. It is this relentless drive which enables Omar to come into the gym at the start of every session and say with a sense of excitement and enthusiasm and more than a touch of humour ‘So coach, what will we learn today’...”

To paraphrase the words of Edward Kennedy “Ask not what your sport can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your sport” Omar is determined to feed something back to the sport he so enjoys. When he is not training he loves helping to coach other gymnasts with disabilities. He plays a key role in motivating and helping younger gymnasts with disabilities at the Cheshire Academy and as the coaches admit, has a keen eye spotting and correcting mistakes. “There is no need to try and explain a move, Omar just steps up to the fore and just demonstrates it.”

Every sport has to have its heroes and as far as disability gymnastics is concerned Omar Haddad wins gold in that department.